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Intersex, Identity and Disability: Issues for Public Policy, Healthcare and the Church

Briefing Paper 4

Intersex Conditions (DSDs):
Some Christian Theological Implications

**INTERSEX
IDENTITY & DISABILITY**

Intersex Conditions/DSDs: Some Christian Theological Implications

Introduction

Intersex conditions, sometimes called disorders of sex development or DSDs,¹ are of significance when it comes to thinking about human sexuality. Their existence makes clear that human beings are not always incontrovertibly male or female in their physical features. As a result, theological anthropologies which operate under the assumption that all human beings are incontrovertibly male or female physically – and that their gender and sexuality will inevitably supervene on this physical sex in specific ways – are called into question. Some intersex people and others have suggested that intersex therefore has specific implications for theological responses to other issues such as homosexuality and same-sex marriage. At root, however, intersex is not a question of human sexuality as such. People with intersex conditions might identify as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual in their orientation, just as anyone else might. This paper is designed to give a brief summary of existing research on intersex and Christian theology.

For more information on the other papers in this series, see the end of this document.

Christian theology and intersex conditions: an overview

Christian theologies, and denominational statements on human gender, have in the past taken little to no account of the existence of physical intersex conditions. However, within the last decade, work has begun to appear which makes clear that the existence of intersex necessitates robust theological reflection. Several theologians have suggested that anthropologies which assume that all human beings are clearly either male or female in terms of their physical sex should be reconsidered in light of intersex. A fuller overview of

¹ DSD, short for disorders of sex development, is an alternate term for intersex conditions and is increasingly being used by medical professionals. However, many intersex people oppose its use because of the stigmatizing implications of the word “disorder”. For this reason, the term intersex is used in this paper. For a fuller account of the debates over terminology, see Briefing Paper 1 in this series, and Cornwall 2010: 44-48.

the extant theological work on intersex can be found in Cornwall 2010: 4-12; this account is summarized below.

i. Intersex, Creation and the Fall

It has sometimes been suggested that intersex conditions represent a distortion of God's original plan for humanity of clear, dimorphic male and female sex. In this account, intersex does not arise as a result of individual sin, but is nonetheless a reminder of the fact that humans live in a fallen and imperfect world in which even biology has been tainted. Dennis P. Hollinger, the evangelical theologian and bioethicist, argues,

"There are some sexual states deviating from the creational norms that are hardwired into a given person. What are we to make of these phenomena theologically and ethically? From a theological standpoint we can understand these conditions as results of the fallen condition of our world, including the natural world ... We should also understand that such natural sexual conditions and anomalies in no way undermine the creational norms. All distortions in the world are to be judged against the divine creational givens. In a fallen world there will be chaos and confusion that extends even to human sexuality. But the normative structure toward which God calls humanity is not the fallenness of nature; it is, rather, God's created designs." (Hollinger 2009: 84)

It might be countered that this kind of account stigmatizes variant sex and gender, rendering them "fallen" in a way that other, male and female bodies are not – and, indeed, that it too unproblematically endows "normal" male and female bodies with something approaching perfection. Hollinger's argument seems to be that intersex conditions are exceptional enough not to disturb the broad dimorphic male-and-female pattern. However, intersex's frequency, affecting at least 1 in 2,500 people, means that people whose physical sex is not clearly male or female are a sizeable minority. Furthermore, theologies working with preconceived notions of what constitutes a good or legitimate body may risk excluding non-typical bodies in a way which is difficult to justify ethically.

The Christian psychologists Heather Looy and Hessel Bouma remark that it is hard to imagine that the diversity of genders both across various species and among humans (and

the diversity of traits within genders among humans) all result from sin or a cosmic Fall. It is therefore also difficult, they argue, to suppose “that God’s creational intent was monolithic females and males” (Looy and Bouma 2005: 175). They pose important questions about how Christian communities “might ... seek to minister with persons who are intersexed and transgendered” and “recognize that gender assignments for such persons ... are tentative and might be subject to change” (Looy and Bouma 2005: 176). Looy suggests, “Rather than instinctively and unreflectively labeling intersexuality as either sinful action, or an example of a broken creation, we should at least ask whether intersexuality could be part of God’s good creation” (Looy 2002: 16). This argument echoes those put forward by members of the intersex advocacy and rights movement which suggest that intersex conditions should be understood as variations rather than pathologies.

However, Karen Lebacqz, a bioethicist from the USA, maintains that just because intersex arises naturally (that is, usually with no known external trigger), it need not be accepted as non-pathological. She asserts,

“We need not see all differences as God’s mistakes, but we also need not see them all as God’s will. The fact that children are born with ambiguous genitals may be incontrovertible evidence that there are not only two ways of being born, but that fact does not, alone, mean that we should allow every way of living that happens in nature.” (Lebacqz 1997: 224)

She asks whether, given the “ostracism, rejection and ridicule” likely to be attached to life with unusual genitals, it is justifiable not to perform corrective surgery, and asserts that “we cannot claim that it is necessarily God’s will for people to grow up intersexed” (Lebacqz 1997: 225). Importantly, however, studies since 1997 have shown that “ostracism, rejection and ridicule” are not in fact inevitable for people with unusual genitalia, and that surgery itself can also have a detrimental impact on the physical and psychological wellbeing of intersex people (Kessler 1998; Preves 2003; Karkazis 2008). Looy and Bouma also make a similar point to Lebacqz, that the mere existence of a phenomenon in nature does not mean it is unproblematically good (Looy and Bouma 2005: 175-6). They suggest that intersex poses particular challenges about where the line between healthy and pathological types of

human sex should be drawn, and about whether some variations do point to the fact that humans live and exist in a fallen creation.

It is important to note that other scholars (e.g. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott) have taken issue with the assumptions held by Lebacqz, and have affirmed that intersex is not only non-pathological, but is a specific site of God's blessing and revelation. Mollenkott holds that "the binary gender construct ignores or contradicts factual reality" (Mollenkott 2007: 2), and that Christianity has oppressed people with intersex conditions just as it has those who are transgender, homosexual and bisexual. She asserts that "God made no mistake by creating intersexuals. Therefore, their condition represents God's perfect will for them and for our culture" (Mollenkott 2007: 7).

ii. Intersex and the Bible

Theologies which appeal to a clear and dimorphic classification of human beings into male and female are usually grounded in the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. Sometimes, these verses are also used to support an understanding of creation with inbuilt roles and responsibilities appropriate to each gender. For example, argues John Piper, "The Bible reveals the nature of masculinity and femininity by describing diverse responsibilities for man and women while rooting these differing responsibilities in creation, not convention ... Differentiated roles were corrupted, not created, by the fall. They were created by God" (Piper 2006: 35). Similarly, the Evangelical Alliance's 2000 report on transsexuality says, "The doctrine of creation with the story of Adam and Eve, and the insistence that 'male and female he created them', shows that our sexual identity is part of the 'givenness' of how we have been made" (Evangelical Alliance 2000: 48).

However, there is debate among scholars about whether sexed differentiation should be understood as part of God's original plan for humanity. Mollenkott draws on readings of Genesis that appeal to a primal single sex or androgyny in the original human. Thus, she argues, "intersexuals are not only part of God's original plan, they are primarily so!" (Mollenkott 2007: 98) and might be "viewed as reminders of Original Perfection" (Mollenkott 2007: 99).

Sally Gross, formerly a Roman Catholic priest, argues in more detail Mollenkott's point that "there is a rabbinical gloss on Gen. 1.27 which suggests that 'Adam', at least,

most certainly did not have a clear and unequivocal gender identity, and indeed that Adam was a hermaphrodite” (Gross 1999: 70). Consequently, says Gross, “to use the verse in support of a razor-sharp division of humankind between male and female is perhaps misguided” (Gross 1999: 71). The suggestion that Adam’s androgynous nature predated Adam’s sinful nature is important, for it may imply that sexual differentiation, not intersex or androgyny, can be understood as “fallen” or a move away from the original ideal (Gross 1999: 74). Gross notes that Genesis 1:27 is often cited as “proof” that intersex is not part of God’s original plan for human sex, remarking that the verse has been used by Christians to tell her that God created each person either male or female with nothing in between, and that intersex people do not therefore satisfy the biblical criterion of humanity (Gross 1999: 70). Gross reports being told by Christian acquaintances that her baptism was not valid since, as she did not fall into either of the categories “determinately male” or “determinately female”, she also did not fall into the category “human”, and was therefore not “the kind of thing which could have been baptized validly” (Gross 1999: 70).

Patricia Beattie Jung, a Roman Catholic ethicist, notes that Genesis 1:26-28 has been strongly emphasized within the Roman Catholic tradition in particular not only because it links male-and-femaleness with imaging God, thus constituting “the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology” (Jung 2006: 301; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004: 5), but also because it is appealed to by Jesus in his response to questions about divorce – suggesting this model of humanity is foundational. Sexual difference as male-and-female, then, is not only biological and psychological but also ontological (Jung 2006: 302). However, Jung argues that the fact Genesis says that male and female are made in the image of God does not mean that only males and females reflect the *imago dei*. She concludes,

“When the church finally recognizes that intersexed, like male and female, persons have been made in the image and likeness of God, then perhaps Christians will come closer to recognizing that God is not male, female, or intersexed but rather truly beyond human sexual differentiation.” (Jung 2006: 307)

Intersex Christians have themselves spoken of the importance of being recognized as having been made in God’s image. In 2012, Susannah Cornwall of the Lincoln Theological

Institute interviewed intersex Christians in Britain about the overlaps between their intersex and faith identities, and their experiences in church. One interviewee, David Forrester, said,

“As a student I discovered that I wasn’t on my own and that homo sapiens wasn’t the only species that produced intersex offspring. It exists in every life form on the planet. And I thought, that isn’t an accident, that is design. It’s there for a reason ... I was meant to be. I’m not an accident, I’m not an aberration, I’m not a mutant ... God doesn’t make mistakes”.

Other intersex Christians interviewed as part of this project explicitly appealed to the Bible as warrant for their beliefs that God had intended them to be as they were:

“I always felt that God made me and that the Bible says that God wove me together in my mother’s womb and has always known me and knows everything about me, so that I felt that I couldn’t be some horrible mistake or some terrible accident. And so that kind of gave me hope ... Certainly when I was younger I would probably have really, really struggled to accept myself except for the fact that I just felt, well, God accepted me, and it just made me feel that there was a purpose to it. It wasn’t just a complete accident. And that was really the biggest thing for me, feeling like, well, God planned it for some reason. And that the Bible tells me that everything works for my good.” (Poppy Hodges)

“Just be accepting ... Because people are made in the image of God.” (Matthew Lawson)

Some scholars have suggested that the biblical eunuchs might be understood as proto-intersex figures. Thomas Bohache suggests that, in Matthew 19:12, Jesus is “referring to a broad category of people who, from their birth, have not ‘fitted’ the predominant expectations of gender and sexuality” (Bohache 2006: 510) – including intersex people. It is significant that, in Matthew 19, being a eunuch seems to be understood as a blessing or gift. Significantly, says J. David Hester,

“Jesus heals the blind, the paralyzed, the possessed, the fevered, the leprous, the haemorrhaging, even the dead, in every case restoring them to full societal membership. In the case of the eunuch, however, there is no implication whatsoever of ‘illness’ or social ‘deformity’ in need of restoration.” (Hester 2005: 38)

Megan K. DeFranza (2011) draws on engagements with the biblical eunuchs in the writings of the Church Fathers in order to suggest that, from its beginnings, Christianity interacted with contemporaneous understandings of human sex which were more complex than a simple male or female picture: “From their discussions of eunuchs, we are able to argue that people in the ancient world were more familiar with variations of sex development than contemporary readers and that they supplemented their binary model of human sex/gender with the marginal category of the eunuch” (DeFranza 2011: 121). Given that Jesus is clearly not disgusted or scandalized by eunuchs, Christians today should not reject or exclude intersex people, whose sex-gender identities also exist outside the norm (DeFranza 2011: 126). Making a strong association between ancient eunuchs and present-day intersex people, she says,

“Christian theological anthropology can aid the case of the intersexed by showing that intersex persons have been among the human family and recorded in the history of Christianity for millenia ..., that the intersexed were honored by Jesus (who raised them up from symbols of shame to become icons of radical discipleship), that the intersexed have participated in church leadership and public service in the Church and Christian societies, and that they have provided resources for thinking theologically about the significance of sex, gender, and sexuality in this life and the life to come—both in the early church and the middle ages ..., and again in the postmodern period.” (DeFranza 2011: 321)

Significantly, David Forrester also spoke about the importance of the Matthew 19 passage on eunuchs for his journey of faith and self-acceptance:

“I was brought up to read the Bible and to form my own ideas of what the Bible was saying. Of course I scoured the Bible to find out anything to do with intersex and I was thrilled when I discovered that Jesus spoke about it. My interpretation of what Jesus said about eunuchs ... I thought that was wonderful, yes. And that was the springboard for my faith. I thought, Jesus knows I exist! I’m not on my own. Because I thought I was the only one in the world, you see ... When I discovered that Jesus knew about people like me, I thought, that’s all I

need. That was the beginning of me discovering myself and fighting for myself. Because I thought, well, if Jesus believes in me, I'm going to do it."

iii. Intersex, homosexuality and marriage

Patricia Beattie Jung argues that "in a polymorphic model of human sexuality intersexuality would most probably be seen as morally normative" (Jung 2006: 298). She contends that behaviours rejected by the mainstream Christian tradition (such as homosexual activity) would not necessarily be seen as problematic if the sexually dimorphic model in which the notion of gender complementarity rests were disturbed.

John Hare, an Anglican priest also trained in gynaecology and obstetrics, uses intersex to open a space of questioning around homosexuality (Hare 2007: 98-9). He notes that the Church of England's own ethical teaching and discipline on human sexuality "depends ... on the ability to define and recognize two sexes, male and female; to assign appropriate roles to each; and to define their appropriate behaviour" (Hare 2007: 99). However, he says,

"The existence of intersexuality confounds the tidy categories that some Christian ethicists and church leaders work with and challenges us all to think more deeply about the God-given nature of our sexuality ... The condition of intersexuality ... draws our attention to the complexity and diversity involved in the development of human sexuality." (Hare 2007: 99)

Hare criticizes the Church of England bishops for failing adequately to engage with intersex in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (House of Bishops 2003), saying, "Such an omission speaks powerfully of an agenda dominated by the particular dynamics of an internal church debate rather than one that seeks to speak to the diversity of actual human experience and the challenges that humans face" (Hare 2007: 99). The assertion in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* that "to be a human person is to exist bodily as either male or female and to relate to God and other people as such" (House of Bishops 2003: 244), says Hare, "implies that intersexual persons cannot have a proper relationship with God or other people, as they cannot properly exist bodily as male or female" (Hare 2007: 106). He believes that intersex

has profound implications for the Church of England's debates on gender in general and human sexuality (including homosexuality) in particular. He sums up the main questions raised as follows:

"Can the rigid division of humanity into male and female still be upheld?

If the Church is to make certain roles gender dependent, and declare that those who cross these barriers commit sin, how are these genders to be determined?

If a person has an ambiguous gender should that person be permitted to choose what gender to adopt, or to remain ambiguous?

Do these factors have any relevance to the debate over same-sex relationships?" (Hare 2007: 105)

Hare notes the argument that intersex bodies are exceptions that test the male-and-female rule without disproving it altogether. "Conversely", he counters, "it could equally be argued that such cases are illustrative and reveal something lacking in our understanding of sex that draws us towards making clearer distinctions than reality permits" (Hare 2007: 107).

The existence of intersex also, suggests Susannah Cornwall, raises problems for those who assert that marriage may only occur between a man and a woman. Even leaving aside transgender people who live in a gender which does not "match" their physical sex, the existence of intersex conditions means that not every person who lives as a woman necessarily has female anatomy in every respect. Someone with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome will have female external genitalia, and secondary female sex characteristics such as breasts. She will almost certainly live and identify as a woman, and (if she chooses to) will probably be able to have penetrative sexual intercourse with a male partner (some women with AIS have shorter than usual vaginas, which can make penetrative sex difficult). However, she will also have (or have had at some point) testes, which may or may not produce sperm, and XY chromosomes. For the purposes of marriage, is she male or female? If marriage rests only on legal sex, notes Cornwall, this raises questions about how far the cosmic significance of sex supervenes on sometimes-arbitrary gender assignments at birth – and makes it more difficult to argue that transgender people should not also be allowed to

marry someone of the opposite gender (that is, of the same biological sex as themselves) (Cornwall 2010: 75).

Cornwall concludes that a lack of knowledge about intersex has affected not just sexual moralities but Church teachings about gender, marriage, the family, and much more. These have fed back into the norms of societies which consider intersex as somehow a failure to make sense. She suggests that a project of education on and engagement with issues of intersex in the Church would enable appropriate pastoral care and debate. She argues that appreciating the complexity and diversity of human embodiment, biology and sex identity has implications for male-and-female heterosexual norms deeply naturalized across theological discourse – and that the Church is called to speak with those whose bodies are written out of legitimacy (Cornwall 2010: 230-236).

Sarah Graham, another intersex Christian interviewed as part of the Intersex, Identity and Disability project, says,

“I feel like from a communications perspective the issue of lesbian and gay rights or lesbian and gay equality is killing the Church of England and especially carrying the message to young people. It’s making the Church of England look so disconnected and out of touch and you know, really aligning it with prejudice and lots of values which are really the opposite of what Christianity is all about. And I think that intersex in a way provides a key or a kind of path around that debate which has got very stuck.”

iv. Intersex and transgender

Other Christian theologians have discussed intersex in the context of transgender. For example, in his 1982 pamphlet *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, Oliver O’Donovan says,

“There are, of course, rare syndromes in which one might confess doubt as to the patient’s original relation to the XX/XY alternative ... But such a doubt cannot obscure the primary fact that human sexuality at the biological level is dimorphic in intent, and that the only way to understand biological ambiguity, even at the chromosomal level, is as a malfunction in the dimorphic programme.” (O’Donovan 1982: 7)

Here, intersex is contrasted with the non-physical gender atypicalities associated with transgender. O'Donovan argues that, whilst intersex does arise naturally, it is simply anomalous and does not disrupt a polarized account of human sex. Interestingly, although O'Donovan rejects sex reassignment surgery for transgender people because it goes beyond the bounds of the God-givenness of their bodies, he believes that corrective surgery for intersex (which he calls hermaphroditism, in line with the norms of the time at which he is writing) is allowable: "Surgery ... is appropriate to resolve the ambiguities of the hermaphrodite ... The resulting sex ... is the real sex of the hermaphrodite. That is to say, it is the sex to which, in view of the ambiguity, it is sensible to assign him" (O'Donovan 1982: 13). O'Donovan's confidence in medicine's capacity to "correct" intersex is echoed in Hollinger's much more recent assertion that "With today's medical advances, many of these distortions can in part be rectified in the direction of divine givens" (Hollinger 2009: 84).

Rodney Holder also justifies surgical intervention for intersex but not transgender. However, this seems to be based in evidence which has subsequently been called into question; for example, he asserts that surgical reassignment for intersex is "uncontroversial", and that "immediate post-natal surgical sex assignment seems to work in that individuals rarely suffer gender identity disturbance" (Holder 1998a: 90). Early corrective surgery has in fact been extremely controversial, and some intersex opponents to the early surgery paradigm have argued precisely that early surgery is more damaging to gender identity than unusual genitals are in themselves (see Cornwall 2010: 53-7).

Susannah Cornwall (2009) criticizes the use of intersex as a foil to transgender by O'Donovan, Holder and others. She suggests that the reduction of transgender to a psychological disturbance diminishes its significance for highlighting the instability of sex and gender categories. She also criticizes the assumption that human sex is always something which is self-evident and can be known beyond doubt, and suggests that intersex disrupts the certainty of the male-female binary on which much Christian opposition to transgender is based. She remarks,

"By failing to query or provide a counter-example to O'Donovan's assertions about intersex ... the authors of *Some Issues [in Human Sexuality]* fail to give intersex consideration in its own right. It is only 'useful' as a contrast to transgender. The specific issues and

experiences of intersex people are not dealt with at all, and the huge implications of the existence of intersex for theological accounts of human sex, gender and sexuality do not even begin to be recognized. This is reprehensible ethically, ecclesiologically, and even eschatologically: human sex is just not as simple as we have been led to believe.” (Cornwall 2009: 22)

v. Intersex, disability, healing and resurrection

Indeed, Cornwall argues that the strong emphasis on incarnation in the Christian tradition means that Christian theologians cannot afford to write off particular types of bodies as unproblematically pathological, or as reflecting the divine-human relationship less perfectly than others – particular where these bodies do not usually appear in themselves to compromise physical wellbeing. She uses theologies from disability, in particular, to raise questions about perfection and healing for human bodies, and the nature of embodiment post-resurrection. Cornwall engages with arguments by theologians such as John M. Hull (2001, 2003) and Hannah Lewis (2007), and builds on these to suggest that intersex, too, might be figured as an alternative mode of bodiliness but not necessarily one which will be healed or perfected away in the new creation. Just as the perceptions of sighted and hearing people should not be considered the only or most legitimate ones, since this perpetuates the marginalization of the experience of people with disabilities, so the perceptions of unambiguously-sexed people should not be considered primary or unproblematically universalizable. Cornwall notes J. David Hester’s remark that one strategy for overcoming the marginalization of people with intersex conditions might be one which recognizes that “‘healing’ is not ‘healing from’, but living comfortably and healthily with oneself as intersex” (Hester 2006: 48). Rather than assuming that deaf people will hear in the new creation, we ought ask whether Jesus can sign (Lewis 2007: 133); rather than assuming intersexed bodies will be perfected to unambiguity, says Cornwall, we ought ask what such assumptions suggest about our own anxieties.

Intersex interviewee David Forrester also spoke about links between intersex and disability, saying,

“Don’t regard intersex, any more than disability, as a tragedy. Don’t use that word, tragedy. The tragedy is when we’re misunderstood and people take over our lives for us. That’s the tragedy. But being born with an intersex condition is not a tragedy. Being disabled in itself is not a tragedy, it’s what you do with it and how people react to it that turns it into a tragedy.”

Cornwall notes that theologians from Augustine to Moltmann have asserted that there will be some persistence of identity between bodies as they are on earth and bodies in the resurrection. The biblical narratives suggesting that the resurrected Christ still bears the wounds of his crucifixion may imply that other “impairments” will also persist after death, particularly those which have been central to the identity or Gestalt of those who have borne them (Eiesland 1994). Just as Deafness for some Deaf people is understood as an important aspect of identity rather than as a problem to be erased, so intersex might be a central aspect of identity for some people which, if erased or “healed” in the resurrection, would deny the reality and goodness of their earthly body-stories.

Megan K. DeFranza uses the existence of intersex to critique Roman Catholic and evangelical accounts of eschatological personhood (particularly in the work of Stanley J. Grenz) as a unity of male and female, suggesting that, in the body of Christ, otherness and difference no longer exist along stereotypical sex-gender lines. Humanity recreated in the image of Christ will therefore include intersex people and eunuchs (DeFranza 2011: 214-8).

vi. Intersex, Christology and kenosis

Cornwall follows Patricia Beattie Jung in arguing that Christian theology, ethics and praxis should reflect an image of God and of humanity more complex and diverse than a simple binary model of human sex allows, and John Hare in believing that intersex people should not be forced by Church or society into a “clear” gendered position if this does not do justice to their identities. Cornwall argues that binary, polarized theological models of human sex and gender feed into a social-cultural mindset where difference is feared, and exacerbate the marginalization experienced by many intersex people.

Cornwall suggests that “uncertain” or “unambiguous” bodies might echo certain Christlike qualities which unquestioned and clearly-sexed bodies do not. Whilst the

specificity of Jesus' maleness has been figured as theologically significant – not only because it endorses respect for the particularities of other bodies, but also because priesthood has, in some accounts, been figured as a uniquely male quality – Cornwall engages with theologies, like those of Graham Ward (1998, 2007) and Robert E. Goss (2006), which explore Christ's fluidity and mystery rather than his stability and incontrovertibility. In this way, she suggests, "ambiguous" intersex bodies might be understood not as inherently problematic, but as bodies which must – like Christ's – be understood as bodies existing in community, and which represent "fuzzy" boundaries rather than firm ones.

Sally Gross comments that Jesus became for her an icon of suffering and solidarity, as her pain and confusion surrounding bodiliness and issues of gender seemed to echo the multiplicities of Christ's own body (in van Huyssteen 2003). This is particularly significant, says Cornwall, in terms of eucharistic and ecclesiastical conceptions of the Church as the body of Christ. If Christ is in some sense made up of all the bodies of those who participate in his remembrance and who are baptized into the Church, this will include bodies which are intersex (as well as other "unusual" kinds of bodies). The Church as the body of Christ must therefore continue to consider what it means to be a body which is multiple and, in some senses, problematic. Participation in the body of Christ does not cancel out each body's uniqueness – "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:5). Thus, suggests Cornwall, even apparently incompatible entities may be held together. Since human bodies are already part of the new creation, the bodies which call themselves the Church have an especial responsibility to model this new order by looking beyond even apparently self-evident patterns of human being. This must be done even where, and especially where, it will entail a shake-up and re-examination of its own foundational assumptions (Cornwall 2010: 95-8).

As a result, she suggests, Christians who do not have intersex conditions – those whose physical sexes are never called into question or considered uncertain – must think hard about their ethical duties to those whose bodies are figured as ambiguous and, often, problematic, both inside and outside the Church. She suggests that ceding the privilege attached to fixed, stable, clear sex identities might be part of the kenotic activity required of the non-intersex majority. This action, done for the intersex "others" who remain integral parts of the whole, might, she suggests, be part of what it means for non-intersex people to

be souls and bodies given as living sacrifices for the Body of Christ (Cornwall 2010: 99-108). The Body of Christ is intersex, because its members (or constituents) include intersex bodies.

Conclusions

Theologies which assume everyone is clearly male or female may find themselves uncomfortably stretched when they begin to take into account the experiences of people whose bodies do not fit either category. Theologies which are specifically concerned with human sexuality similarly often assume a stable, polarized model of male and female human sex. Theologies exhorting the good of heterosexual marriage as the ideal arena for human sexual activity often appeal to Genesis 1:26-28 as evidence that clear maleness and femaleness is what images God and is part of the divine plan for humanity.

Some theologians have suggested that both homosexual activity, and gender transition for transgender people, exceed the bounds of this original male and female plan for humanity. It becomes more difficult to maintain these positions in light of intersex conditions, since intersex demonstrates that the connections between human sex, gender and sexuality may not be as stable or monolithic as has been supposed. Nonetheless, some theologians, including Dennis P. Hollinger (2009), maintain that intersex bodies are exceptions which result from the Fall and do not undermine the solely-male-or-female divine intent for humanity.

However, it is possible to understand intersex conditions not as pathological, or as something which has gone wrong with the male-and-female divine plan for creation, but as evidence that the diversity of creation is broader than we can easily understand. Whilst the biblical witness might continue to be accepted as a fundamental source of knowledge about what it is to be a sexed human being in relation to God, embodied human experience (including the experience of intersex people in their own relationships with God) provides a further compelling source of knowledge. Characterizing intersex bodies merely as exceptional phenomena may do too little to raise questions about whether or not a solely male and female account of humanity can be justified in theological or ethical terms.

Appendix

Additional quotations from interviews conducted with intersex Christians for the Intersex, Identity and Disability project

“Who am I supposed to marry? And why can’t I marry the person I love, if that person happens to be a woman? That’s crazy. If I really insisted on my intersex-ness ... if I did kind of wave the intersex flag in the Church, would it be okay for me to marry a man? I look female and I pass as female, I am female. I have XY chromosomes, so on a chromosomal level I am certainly intersex. The most male part of me, if you like, was removed against my will as a 7-year-old. So I suppose that has expunged the kind of confusion ... So ... because I don’t have testes, does that make it okay for me to marry a man? If I still had testes though, would it be okay for me to marry a man? Yes? Well, I don’t think most people have even begun to think about that.” (Sarah Graham)

“It’s very important for me to believe that my God, the God, ... created me in a complete way and that it’s okay and meant to be this way. Not meant to get things changed and it’s not a disorder. It’s who I am, just like anybody ... There’s an infinite variety in God’s universe.” (Anthony Unwin)

“The way I feel is, to God, it doesn’t really matter whether I am a man or a woman. It just matters that I am who I am, who he made me ... So I suppose I feel freed from a lot of the burdens that I had earlier on in my Christian faith when I was feeling under pressure to behave in certain ways and to do certain things ... And I suppose as a Catholic it feels like there’s a lot greater role for women ... When I was Reformed it was like, well, basically, ‘Shut up, only talk to other women, and don’t try to usurp any authority’. And that felt a bit like, ‘Oh, so okay, why? Because, actually, my chromosomes are the same as all these wonderful people who are supposed to be lording over me’. It just didn’t make any sense to me really.” (Poppy Hodges)

“I always remember ... thinking, well, if anyone is going to be able to support me outside my immediate family, perhaps my faith and the people who are sincere in their faith will understand. I’ve actually found an awful lot of understanding. The most recent one ... was with the [Church of England] bishop. What I began to gather from people is that once you start to explain to them, they go with you. They want to know more ... The vast majority of Christians that I’ve spoken to ... have been extremely positive and supportive and appalled quite frankly ... They weren’t aware that this [early corrective surgery for intersex] went on.” (David Forrester)

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Intersex, Identity and Disability: Issues for Public Policy, Healthcare and the Church

Briefing Papers

This paper forms part of a series of resources on intersex conditions and Christian theology produced by the Lincoln Theological Institute at the University of Manchester.

Briefing Paper 1 outlines what intersex conditions/DSDs are and how they have been treated medically, giving information about the causes and frequency of specific conditions.

Briefing Paper 2 is designed particularly for people concerned with the pastoral and spiritual care of people with intersex conditions/DSDs and the families of intersex children – for example, Christian ministers, and those who work in healthcare chaplaincy.

Briefing Paper 3 focuses on the implications of the existence of intersex conditions/DSDs for the Christian churches' policy and teaching on sex, gender and sexuality. It is particularly designed for those involved in reviews of policy on human sexuality and gender, and for social responsibility officers and those involved in equalities and diversity work.

Briefing Paper 4 gives an overview of the specifically theological implications of the existence and treatment of intersex conditions/DSDs from a Christian perspective. It is particularly designed for clergy and church leaders, those involved in theological education on sex, gender and sexuality, and anyone else interested in theological anthropology.

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